

## Preface

This Occasional Paper sets out to explore how Michael Balint's work in the 1950s and 1960s influences general practice education today. Can Balint groups that focus on the doctor–patient relationship still offer vocational training schemes (VTS) something that they can ill-afford to be without or has the Balint influence been fully subsumed into the culture of general practice education? At a time when much work in vocational training reflects the current fashion for competency and skill-based approaches – based on that which can be demonstrated and tested – is something valuable being neglected or lost? The research takes a step back. It is an interpretive study that explores what happens when a Balint group takes place in VTS training, how it is variously read and understood by practitioners, and with what likely benefits and consequences.

The research questions at the heart of this investigation are:

- *What does a Balint approach to small-group work in VTS provide?*
- *Given the likely complexity of the learning process, how was effectiveness to be gauged? What did effectiveness mean in this context?*
- *What wider lessons might an intensive analysis of a Balint approach in one VTS group have for course organisers and other educators who wish to put it to work?*

The study uses an ethnographic approach to make a qualitative study of one group. In following this line, we eschewed more specified, pre-delineated research questions in favour of allowing new questions to emerge from what was gradually discovered. The qualitative issues that came up seemed potentially more rewarding as they derived directly from observations made, rather than being determined arbitrarily in advance. Some of the emerging specific themes that are explored in the discussion are:

- What was the learning climate in small groups in GP vocational training? How was it being put to work and understood?
- What were the dynamics of learning in a small group, and how might the Balint approach affect them?
- What might be an appropriate methodology for evaluating small-group work in VTS?
- What else was happening in the small groups under study and with what possible effects?
- How was the Balint approach variously understood? What were the differences that make a difference?

The study looked in some depth at one particular VTS Balint group to explore what use its members made of the experience. What emerges from the case studies illustrates both the potential of the small group and also of the method used to investigate the subject. The case studies illustrate further the splendid potential that narrative research can contribute to our understanding of small-group learning. Because it uses ethnography, the study happily ends with more questions about small-group learning rather than offering clearly defined answers. In so doing it illustrates further the multi-faceted value of this approach.

## Authors' note

This paper is based on the final report of a research project into small-group work in vocational training in the London area. The project was funded by the Scientific Foundation Board of the Royal College of General Practitioners and by the London Deanery. Ruth Pinder carried out the research and she is the main author of this paper. Anne McKee gave ongoing advice and guidance to the project and to the writing of the report. Without her expert input neither the research nor the writing of this paper would have been possible. The GP authors were all members of the Steering Committee for the project. They also took an active part in the research and in the writing of this paper. The principal authors of each Section are indicated but all the authors were involved in the production of the final manuscript.

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